

H1N1 Flu Questions and Answers

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Q: How serious is the H1N1 flu?

The CDC estimates that, between April and November 14, 2009, there were 47 million H1N1 cases, more than 200,000 H1N1-related hospitalizations, and more than 9,800 H1N1-related deaths.

Although many cases of the H1N1 flu are mild, it can be very serious. Unlike the seasonal flu, which is most severe among the elderly, the H1N1 flu has had a disproportionately severe impact on children, teenagers, and adults under age 65. In fact, the number of children and young adults killed through mid-November was five times more than during an average flu season.

It is especially important for people at high risk for serious complications, such as pregnant women, people under age 25, and those with asthma, diabetes or another underlying condition, to seek medical attention if they are sick, and to ask their doctor if a prescription for an antiviral medicine is appropriate.

Q: Has the H1N1 flu peaked?

While H1N1 flu is declining in many areas, it is important to remember that flu is unpredictable. There may be a third wave of H1N1 illness – or even several more waves. We are still early in the traditional flu season, which typically lasts through May. Right now, Americans have a window of opportunity to get vaccinated to avoid getting the flu and reduce the impact of, or even prevent, a third wave of H1N1.

Q: Is the H1N1 vaccine safe?

Clinical trials conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the vaccine manufacturers have consistently shown that the 2009 H1N1 vaccine is both safe and effective. The FDA has licensed it. There have been no safety shortcuts.

H1N1 vaccine is produced exactly the same way the seasonal flu vaccine is produced every year; only the particular strain of virus has changed. The vaccine is made using the tried and true technique of growing vaccine in eggs. This was the best method available this flu season to get the H1N1 vaccine to the American people safely and as quickly as possible.

Millions of Americans, including many children and pregnant women, have been safely and effectively vaccinated against seasonal flu for years.

Still, to alleviate any concerns that some Americans may have concerns about “new” vaccines, the NIH and the vaccine manufacturers conducted especially rigorous tests on the 2009 H1N1 vaccine, and there were no safety flags from these clinical trials.

In addition, CDC, FDA, and HHS have stepped up surveillance efforts to track the H1N1 vaccine and any possible adverse events. Because it is so closely related to the seasonal flu vaccine, we do not expect to see any increase in serious side effects, and, so far, with tens of millions of doses given, we have seen no increase. Nevertheless, we are taking all the necessary steps to promote and monitor safety.

Q: Why are some lots of pediatric H1N1 vaccine being recalled from the market?

As part of its quality assurance program, vaccine manufacturer sanofi pasteur found that approximately 800,000 doses of its pediatric H1N1 vaccine in pre-filled syringes, which are used to vaccinate children ages 6 months to 35 months, lost a very slight amount of their potency over time. Because the potency falls just outside the manufacturer’s own technical specifications, the manufacturer is voluntarily removing these doses from the distribution system.

There are no safety concerns with these doses of the H1N1 vaccine, and HHS scientists believe that the doses that have been given are still adequately immunogenic. Accordingly, children who received doses of the recalled vaccine do not need to be revaccinated, even if both of a child’s doses were from this lot of vaccine. (All children less than 10 years old should get the recommended two doses of H1N1 vaccine approximately a month apart.)

Q: Should I get vaccinated against 2009 H1N1 if I have already had flu-like illness since the Spring of 2009?

Yes. The symptoms of influenza are similar to those caused by many other viruses. Even when flu viruses are causing large numbers of people to get sick, other viruses are also causing illness.

If you were ill but do not know for sure that you had the 2009 H1N1 flu, you are encouraged to get vaccinated.

The flu season typically lasts through May. Flu comes in waves, and previous pandemics have had multiple waves. We can't predict whether there will be additional waves of illness, how many waves there might be, or whether they will be primarily H1N1 or seasonal flu.

We also cannot predict whether the virus will mutate and change between waves. Experts at the CDC believe vaccination against H1N1 can offer some basic protection even if the virus changes. So far, the H1N1 vaccine remains an excellent match for the 2009 H1N1 flu virus.

Q: Who should get the H1N1 vaccine?

Everyone is encouraged to get the H1N1 vaccine. As flu illness has declined in many areas, and as many states begin to offer vaccine to the general public, Americans have a window of opportunity to get vaccinated and reduce the spread of H1N1 flu. Pregnant women, people with underlying health conditions like asthma and diabetes, and children and young adults under age 25 are at greater risk from the H1N1 flu. That is why it is especially important for these groups, as well as health care workers and caretakers of infants under 6 months of age, to get the H1N1 vaccine as soon as possible.

Q: In addition to vaccination, are there other ways to prevent the spread of illness?

Take these everyday steps to protect your health:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- Stay home if you are sick until at least 24 hours after you no longer have a fever (100°F or 37.8°C) or signs of a fever (without the use of a fever-reducing medicine, such as Tylenol®).
- Follow public health advice regarding school closures, avoiding crowds, and other social-distancing measures.

Q: What has the government done to prepare for and respond to the H1N1 pandemic?

After this spring's H1N1 outbreak, the U.S. government took the following aggressive steps to protect public health:

- Launched a public education campaign to curb the spread of the disease, including public service announcements; guidance for schools, businesses, and clinicians; and a new website – flu.gov – to provide the latest information about the flu.
- Released 25 percent of the Strategic National Stockpile of antivirals in the spring.
- Released 593,000 treatment courses of liquid pediatric Tamiflu®.
- Developed a safe and effective H1N1 vaccine.
- Distributed and is continuing to distribute the H1N1 vaccine to more than 90,000 locations across the country.
- Worked closely with states and territories to provide the assistance and resources necessary to develop and execute vaccine distribution plans tailored to local needs.
- Allocated over 100 million doses of H1N1 vaccine as of December 18 2009.
- Authorized the use of a new antiviral intravenous drug under an emergency use authorization for critically ill flu patients.

Q: Where can I get more information or find out where to get the H1N1 vaccine?

Visit Flu.gov – it's the government-wide, one-stop website for information about the flu. Flu.gov includes:

- A flu vaccine locator that can help you find out where to get the seasonal flu vaccine and H1N1 flu vaccine. Just enter your zip code to find the location closest to you.
- A self-evaluation guide where you can check your symptoms and help make decisions about seeking treatment.
- A section on myths and facts about the flu to help people get accurate and timely information about the H1N1 flu and flu vaccine.
- Webcasts on what to do about the flu featuring doctors and scientists.
- Educational tools like TV and radio PSAs in English and Spanish about the importance of getting the H1N1 vaccine.
- Handouts like our *Flu Essentials*, which provide important and easy-to-understand information about how to prevent and treat the flu, and which are available in ten languages to share with neighbors and friends.

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